

Called Beyond Anyone's Expectations

Rich Nathan

February 11 & 12, 2017

Spiritual But Not Religious

Luke 10:38-42

There's probably no person in the world who grew up without any expectations from their parents or from the person who raised them. From the time we're infants, parents have expectations regarding what can be expected from their children at different ages. For example, at what age should a baby be able to crawl? At what age should they be able to walk? At what age should they be able to identify colors?

Cultures differ on child raising philosophies and expectations for children. Traditional cultures begin to toilet train their children at 12 months. Western society typically doesn't begin to toilet train their kids before they're two years old. And I've known parents who don't think their three-year olds should be toilet trained.

When it comes to disciplining children, Western society in America often remove a child from adults or other kids in what we call "time-out" as a way to manage your child's behavior. How many of you have given your child a time-out? Parents in traditional societies that are more collective, more relational – for example, in Southeast Asia – view "time-out" as radically harsh the way Western society might view harsh spanking. For parents in more traditional societies, they reserve "time-outs" for only the most extreme behaviors.

In Western society, parents encourage their children to express their emotions and to be honest about their feelings. We think that it's healthy when a child really is able to express what they are feeling. Don't keep it bottled up inside! On the other hand, Chinese-American mothers were polled and not one of them said that being able to express your emotions is a particularly high value for them in raising their kids. They believe that emotional self-control is really important so that groups are not disrupted.

We were all raised with expectations from our parents or from those who raised us. Of course, you're going to college. You cannot grow up in my home and NOT go to college! It's just assumed that you're going to have higher education. Or nobody in our family has ever gone to college. We're just not that book smart and neither are you.

Some expectations from our families are positive: you are so talented! You can do anything you set your mind to. And some expectations from our families are really negative: you're just like your father. You're going to end up being a bum and a drunk just like he was.

Families have all kinds of expectations regarding their kids. Expectations regarding their athleticism. Expectations regarding their musical ability. “Your mother and I played instruments, you are definitely going to play the cello for at least a decade.”

On the other hand, I was raised in a family where my father said, “We’re not musical!” He was assigned to play the cymbals in his high school orchestra because every kid had to be in the orchestra. Apparently, he would always bang the cymbal on the wrong beat. So my dad said, “We’re not musical!” And he gave none of the kids music lessons. I didn’t take music lessons until I was in my 50’s. And I thought, “You know, I want to learn at least how to read music and know what a chord is before I die.” So, I took piano lessons for a few years.

There are career expectations. How many of you were pushed in a career direction by your parents? I was raised in a Jewish family. When I was first asked the question, I think at age 3, “So, Richard, what do you want to be when you grow up?” My mother would answer, “He wants to be a doctor.” So, growing up, I always thought, because I heard it from my mother a thousand times, “I guess I want to be a doctor.” Even in my high school yearbook, under my photo, regarding future goals I wrote, “Medicine”.

I went to Case up in Cleveland on a scholarship and was pre-med for a year-and-a-half. During that year-and-a-half I discovered two things. First, I really don’t like Science very much. I love the Liberal Arts. I love History. I love Philosophy. I love Religious Studies. I love the Social Sciences. I love Economics. I love Sociology and Psychology. And, second, along with my lack of love for Science, I don’t like hospitals. Medicine is not a great fit for someone who doesn’t enjoy Science and really doesn’t like being around sick people.

Not only do our parents impose expectations on us, but the larger society does as well based upon our age and gender and ethnicity and family background and schooling and jobs. And we impose expectations upon ourselves. Here’s what a mother should do. Here’s what a father should do. Here’s what someone my age should be doing. How do we sort through all these expectations from parents and friends and society and self?

Ephesians 2:10 in the New Living Translation says this:

Ephesians 2:10 (NLT)

¹⁰ For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

God has a plan for each of us. God has a calling on each of our lives. Actually, multiple callings in different seasons of our lives. I’ve called today’s talk, “Called Beyond Anyone’s Expectations”.

Let's pray.

Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹ "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "You are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Let me give you a little bit of background to this text. In verse 38 we read this:

Luke 10:38

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.

The village, of course, was Bethany. Bethany in those days was about 2-3 miles southeast of Jerusalem. It was just on the other side of the Mount of Olives. Bethany would be to Jerusalem like Bexley is to downtown Columbus. The center of Bethany was just a couple of miles from the edge of Jerusalem.

Again, by way of background, I want you to note the very warm and incredibly hospitable relationship that Jesus had with women. If you go through the Gospel of Luke in particular, you see Jesus' extraordinary relationships with women. Luke, the beloved physician, was not only the theologian of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Luke was the great advocate for women's prominence and equality in the New Testament. So many of Luke's stories center on a woman.

If you're taking notes, you might want to jot down Luke 8:1-2. It lists the names of some of the women who were followers of Jesus. What was Martha's problem with her sister Mary's behavior?

Called beyond gender roles

The first problem, I think, that Martha had regarding Mary was the conflict between sitting and serving.

Sitting vs. Serving

There's Martha running around the house, getting the food ready for Jesus and, I assume, for all of his male disciples. She's trying to be a good hostess. She's trying to

entertain Jesus and the disciples well. Martha is making it all happen. You know that in order for some people to sit around, other people have to make life happen.

Take church, for example. In order for some people to be able to sit around and listen to a message or be able to worship and make a spiritual connection with God, other people have to run around making sure that the building is clean, the sound is good, the worship team is prepared, the heat is on, the coffee is out, the message makes sense.

Hundreds of people have to work in the nursery all the way to high school. In fact, we want to acknowledge some of those folks today that work with our kids. If you've served our kids or our students in the past or are currently serving during weekend services, would you stand at this time? We want to say thank you. As a church family, we have an opportunity to say thank you with the Valentine card that you were given as you walked in. Would you, church family, take a moment to send a note to our Vineyard Kids and Student leaders and drop it off at your child's classroom or at the Vineyard Kids counter when you leave today?

After the service, our Vineyard Kids and VC Students leaders will be in the lobby inviting you to serve beginning in March. I want to encourage some of you to not sit, but to serve.

There's another issue, though, and it's not just sitting vs. serving that caused Martha's upset. The particular issue regarding sitting vs. serving applies to who gets to do the sitting and who must do the serving in traditional societies.

Men vs. Women

Some years ago, I was on a short term mission trip to a very traditional society. I was invited to dinner at a pastor's home. Seated at the dining room table was the pastor, his 12-year old son and me. His wife would absolutely not sit down at the table with us. She served. Then after the men, including this 12-year old boy, had eaten, she took the leftovers into another room and she ate with the couple's 16-year old daughter. It was incredibly upsetting to me as someone coming from a Western, egalitarian culture to watch this woman take the leftovers from the men and eat them in another room with her daughter.

What was Martha's problem with Mary's behavior? Certainly, one of Martha's problems was that Mary was behaving as if she was a man. Tom Wright, who is one of the world's great New Testament scholars alive today, points out that in the first century as in many parts of the world today, houses were divided into male spaces and female spaces. Male and female roles were strictly delineated. Mary had crossed an invisible, but huge, boundary within the house, and even more importantly, in the social

world. The public room was where men met together. The kitchen and the outer corridors, that were unseen by outsiders, were the places for women and children.

So, here is this woman, Mary, sitting in the public space along with other men. By the way, when it says that Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus you shouldn't think of a teenage girl sitting there looking up adoringly at a heart throb of an actor. You shouldn't think of a dog that's looking up adoringly at their master. Sitting at the feet was the posture of a student with their teacher or their rabbi. The Apostle Paul, when he was giving his testimony in Jerusalem said this:

Acts 22:3 (ESV)

³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.

In Luke 10, Mary is taking the position of a student of Jesus. She was a disciple. And Martha is upset because that place was to be occupied only by men. I've seen this where women and men who have more traditional views of appropriate gender roles become very upset with women who choose non-traditional roles. Why are you in this work space when you should be in the domestic space? Why are you in a place that men typically occupy when you are a woman?

How many of you women were raised with limitations regarding what Jesus might be calling you to professionally or personally? Of course, being a woman, you would never be expected to enter this particular profession – engineering, the sciences, running a business. How many of you women were taught that God himself intended to limit you regarding the particular ministry you were allowed to exercise in the church?

You know, it's interesting that when the Spirit of God is poured out in a church, expectations regarding what women are allowed to do radically change and women are set free.

Here's what we read:

Acts 2:17-18

“In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy.

This is true, friends, throughout history. Whenever the Spirit of God is poured out, whenever there is a revival, women have been liberated to preach, to be missionaries, to be pastors. This was certainly true of the great Pentecostal Revival that took place at the beginning of the 20th century in Azusa Street in California. For the first 15 years after that great Pentecostal Revival, women were pastoring churches, they were preaching, they were evangelists, there were missionaries. It was only after the Holy Spirit's activity receded that women were forced back into more traditional roles and in many churches were prohibited from entering traditionally male domains.

Here at Vineyard Columbus, we believe that God's gifts and God's calling in ministry are issued to irrespective of gender. There's no gender limit on who can teach or who can preach or who can lead worship or pastor or be an elder or be a church planter or a missionary or a senior pastor. If you'd like to read more about our view here at Vineyard Columbus, you can go online to my website:

www.richnathan.org

Keyword search: WOMEN

I've got a few papers in there on women's role in the church. Or you can pick up one of my books, like *Both-And*. I've got a chapter in there laying out the biblical and theological case for women in ministry.

Now, over the years, I've heard objections from male pastors who have said to me: "You know, Rich, the fact is we don't have any women in our congregation who feel called to preach. We don't have any women in our congregation who feel called to be an Elder or a church planter or to be a missionary."

I've responded and said: "Listen, if you are a woman who was raised in a church where you never see a woman leading and you never see a woman preaching, and where you are taught from a young age that girls cannot be priests or pastors or preach to a mixed congregation of men and women then, of course, it will be hard for you to hear God's voice calling you to preach or pastor."

You may interpret God's call on your life to be your own selfish ambition. You want for yourself what God doesn't want. Or you reinterpret God's call to say God is calling me to write or to teach children or to teach a small group women's Bible study. There's nothing wrong with any of those things, but it will be really difficult for a woman in that setting that restricts roles available to women to imagine that indeed God is calling her beyond anyone's expectations.

Why was Mary commended? Because in a society that was thoroughly male-dominated, Mary was able to fight through all of the cultural negativity and respond

wholeheartedly to Jesus' call to discipleship. Mary said: I'm going to take my cues regarding what I ought to be doing with my life from Jesus! Not from my big sister, not from my brother, not from my society. Mary said: I'm going to ask myself the question, "what does Jesus want for me? What did Jesus create me for? What is Jesus' call on my life?"

Sisters and brothers, have you ever done that? Have you ever said, "You know, I'm going to take my cues regarding how I should spend my life, not from my family or my society or my social circle, but from Jesus."

Sometimes hearing a calling is moving back to a role that traditional society would affirm, but our contemporary, corporate society completely rejects. Brenda Barnes who recently died, shocked the corporate world when she chose to step down as president of PepsiCo North America in 1997 to be with her three children. Here's what she said on NPR:

"The whole issue boils down to time. You know, I was faced with many times when I might not be at a school event or I wouldn't be there at a special moment, you know, for one of my children to tell me about, or when you have very limited time windows, you're trying to force an interaction. The child might not be ready to talk about it then. So just having casual time to interact with your family is what I was finding I was missing too much."

Now, this family had a wonderful nanny. Both Brenda and her husband were both incredibly successful in the corporate world. But sometimes there's a still, small voice saying, "I want you to take a different road. The road that's not traveled much by people with your education, your background, and your professional credentials." That's a road that God has prepared for you, a call to parent or to serve in the church or to help out in your family or volunteer in this non-profit.

I'd like to extend this idea of being called beyond anyone's expectations to something other than gender. God's calling on a person's life also goes beyond age.

Called beyond age

Acts 2:17-18

"In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

A person is never too young to be called to do something great for God.

Never too young

When we think about some of the great men and women in the Bible, it is really helpful for us to remind ourselves that many of these men and women were barely through puberty when God called them. Think about Joseph in the book of Genesis. Or Daniel when he was taken captive to Babylon. Or David when he fought Goliath. Or Solomon when he took over the kingdom. These young men would have been too young to get their learner's permits if they'd had cars back then. And if they had lived in a society in which men shaved, they would have had the barest amount of stubble on their face. Barely enough to shave off. Think of women like Ruth or Esther or Mary, the mother of Jesus. They would have had to go with their parents to an R rated movie. But God used all of them in incredible ways. And it's not just in Bible days that God used young men and young women. We see God do this throughout church history.

Charles Spurgeon, who was the greatest preacher of the 19th century, became a pastor at the age of 16. By the age of 20, he was pastor of the largest church in England.

Evan Roberts was 13 years old when he began to pray for revival in the nation of Wales. He was 26 when God used him to pour out his Spirit on Wales in a revival that extended around the world.

Jackie Pullinger first had a sense of calling to be a missionary when she was a child in Sunday School in London. And at the age of 19, God called her to go to Hong Kong to minister to drug addicts. Over the last half a century, thousands and thousands of drug addicts in Hong Kong found freedom through Jackie Pullinger's ministry. Jackie wrote a wonderful autobiography called *Chasing the Dragon*. She was, by the way, a Vineyard pastor.

No child is ever too young to hear the voice of God. No person is ever too young that God can't use them to do something really great in the Kingdom of God. And, no one is ever too old to be used by God.

Never too old

Here's what we read in Acts 2:17

Acts 2:17

¹⁷ “In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

And I would add: old women. In Psalm 92: 12-15 we read this:

Psalm 92:12-15

¹² The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
¹³ planted in the house of the LORD,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.
¹⁴ They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,
¹⁵ proclaiming, “The LORD is upright;
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.”

C.S. Lewis said:

You’re never too old to set a new goal or dream a new dream.

Do you believe that? People in your 50’s or 60’s or 70’s or 80’s, do you believe that you are never too old to set a new goal or dream a new dream? So many people spend years saving and planning for the time in which they retire. They look forward to the day when they can simply do what interests them. Travel, garden, paint. There are fewer older people who are Kingdom-minded. Few who dare to dream new dreams, who are turning their ear to God and are asking the question: what does Jesus want of me during this season of life? Not what do I want? What interests me? But what is Jesus asking of me?

As my spiritual father in the Lord, John Wimber, used to say: “We’re all just loose change in the pocket of the Lord.” The Lord can spend us any way he chooses. It’s the rare person sees themselves as loose change in the Lord’s pocket. I pray for a church filled with people who would say, “Spend me, Lord, as you see fit! Mold me to your purposes.”

What might the Lord call older people to? Certainly, older adults have a role as mentors and models for younger people. If I was in my 20’s, I would absolutely want to be part of a multigenerational church, as opposed to a totally millennial church – because in a multigenerational church I could attach myself to a few older adults who are full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit. One of the great weaknesses that occurred when we started this church back in the 1970’s was that we were all in our 20’s. We were all like

children trying to raise each other, but there was no spiritual mom or spiritual dad. And I think that really hindered our growth. For me, my growth accelerated when I got to be around a spiritual father, John Wimber.

He mentored me. He gave me counsel. He encouraged me. He called out my gifts. Older adults, you can be mentors. Certainly, older adults, you could start ministries. You say, “At my age? No way! This is the time you finish up, not start things!” Really? You know how old Moses and his brother, Aaron, were when God called them to lead the children of Israel out from slavery and into the Promised Land. Here’s what we read:

Exodus 7:6-7

Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD commanded them. ⁷ Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three when they spoke to Pharaoh.

80 and 83 years old. You’re never too old to start a ministry.

And, finally, we are

Called beyond expressive individualism

Expressive individualism is the reigning philosophy in America today. It says that to live a life worth living, you’ve got to get in touch with the real you and you must express that. Look inside. Find out who you are and then you must express that reality. As I’ve said in the past, there’s something very good and right about wanting to be true to yourself – to be authentic, to not be a fake, to not live a lie. There’s something right and good about the desire to be authentic, to be real. But expressive individualism drives us in the wrong direction because it causes us to ask the wrong questions.

David Brooks, in his book *The Road to Character*, wrote this:

“You don’t ask, what do I want from life? You ask a different set of questions: what does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do? In this scheme of things, we don’t create our lives; we are summoned by life. The important answers are not found inside, they are found outside.”

I might modify that a bit and say that the question is not what do I want from God? The question is, what does God want from me? What is God calling me and calling you to do? What is God saying to you about what you should be doing in this season of life? What about preparing for the next season? Sometimes what God is saying is profoundly uncomfortable.

Let me close with this story. John Perkins who spoke at our church just a few months ago, was born in rural Mississippi back in 1930. He grew up in a family of sharecroppers. He lived in a world in which to be black was to be less than fully human. His mother died when he was 7 months old of pellagra, a painful disease caused by a lack of protein. He had to labor in the fields every day working for a white sharecropper, always in debt. When John was 16, his brother was killed by a deputy marshal in his hometown of New Hebron, Mississippi. His family sent him out to California for his own safety. It was there in California that he met the Lord, he met his wife, he started a couple of businesses. He was making money. He owned a big 12-room house. And then the Lord spoke and said, “Go back to Mississippi. Share the Word of God with the people of Mississippi.” Now if John was governed by expressive individualism, he would have said, “No way, Lord! I’m happy here in California.” But he and his wife were loose change in God’s pocket. The allowed God to spend them as he saw fit. So they went back to Mississippi in 1960 to start a ministry.

Nobody would do that as a black couple, apart from the call of God. God has used John and his wife Vera Mae to lead thousands of people to Christ over the last 50 years. They’ve started multiple ministries including Christian Community Development Association which the Vineyard Community Center is a part of. Hundreds of Evangelical community centers join together to encourage each other in the work of serving the poor in the community. But God calls people beyond anyone’s expectations. Whatever your gender, whatever your age, whatever your situation in life – friend, have you said to the Lord recently: “what do you want to do with my life? How do you want me to spend this next season of my life? I want to be loose change in the pocket of the Lord.”

Let’s pray.

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Luke 10:38-42

- I. Called beyond gender roles
 - A. Sitting vs. Serving
 - B. Men vs. Women
- II. Called beyond age
 - A. Never too young
 - B. Never too old
- III. Called beyond expressive individualism